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THE
PLACING-OUT SYSTEM
IN DEALING WITH
DEPENDENT CHILDREN.

One of the most gratifying and pleasing sights I have ever witnessed, writes Mrs. Robert McPherson, of Bath, N.Y., was the exit of the dependent children of Erie county, New York, from its almshouse on that memorable morning in February, 1874, when they were removed from their pauper home to happier surroundings. As I looked on those interesting children seated in the carriages that had been provided for their transfer to the various asylums in the city of Buffalo, a prayer trembled on my lips that their future might be one of industry, honesty and independence. In my general child-saving labor, I have been privileged to follow the history of many of those children, and as I see them now, self-reliant, self-sustaining men and women, I realize how much they owe to that friend of children, the Hon. W. P. Letchworth, by whose unwearied efforts and personal solicitations for their admission to institutions they were released from the bondage of chronic pauperism long before the mandatory law compelling the removal of children from the poorhouses in New York state was passed.

After it was known that children were no longer allowed in almshouses, but that the superintendent of the poor must send them to orphan asylums, parents who had hitherto struggled to keep their children out of the poorhouses were now only too glad to have them sent to orphan homes. Children were supposed to have good care and training in institutions, the county paid their board, and the state, by a law which is as absurd as it is unjust, gave the parents the selection of the institution to which the child should be sent.

As a consequence of parents being so willing to get rid of their children, and of the asylums being assured of \$1.50 weekly per capita, which covered the actual cost of food and clothing, the number of dependent children in Erie county largely increased; and the honorable board of supervisors being convinced that something must be done to check this increased taxation for charitable institutions, appointed a committee to find out some method of lessening these bills against the county. The report of the committee resulted in the appointment, in 1878, of an agent to secure homes for the county wards. This official was empowered to enter any asylum, Catholic or Protestant, that had children supported by the county and select therefrom such child as circumstances required and place it in the home selected. The first steps taken by the agent were to advertise largely in German and English newspapers, then visit villages, calling on editors and pastors and stirring up a general interest and sympathy in the work. When names of reliable childless families were obtained, advertising

cards with children's pictures were sent to the addresses, and seldom failed to bring applications. Thus homes were canvassed for, orders received, and when suitable children were obtained they were transferred to their new homes to the delight of both foster parents and children.

As the work developed several obstacles, not unforeseen, embarrassed it. Some of the asylums resented the interference of the agent and refused to give up the county's wards. But the Erie county board of supervisors were not disposed to abandon a plan that offered so great possibilities and at a special meeting resolved, "That if any child was refused to the county's agent the superintendent of the poor would at once stop payment of its board;" the price per capita to be paid for children was reduced to \$1.00 per week and an appropriation made for boarding children in families while waiting for a speedy transfer. These plans and resolutions resulted in reducing the bills against the county thousands of dollars and in transferring hundreds of children to the wholesome surroundings of rural life who otherwise might have drifted back to old associations, and probably would have graduated to the poorhouse or prison. In 1871, a second agent was appointed to work exclusively for the Catholic children, and both agencies are still carrying on the good work and doubtless doing much good.

It surprises me that some of our institutions give so little attention to the placing-out system. Managers of orphan asylums seem to measure the success of their work by the increasing number of inmates and are possessed with an insane desire "to build," the means to do so having been in part obtained from the profit of the children's board and, in some cases, of their work. New York city pays \$110 yearly and some of our counties \$2 weekly per capita for dependent children, and when we consider that the teachers in public institutions are paid out of the school funds, that medical attendance is generally given free, and that interests of bequests, yearly subscriptions, donations of food and clothing are continually being received, we need not wonder that there are funds to buy or build. "There is no question," writes Miss Minton, "that the New York system of a per capita sum drawn from public funds is a direct bid for the accumulation of children in asylums."

Now, why, I ask, cannot managers of asylums, when the buildings are crowded, crowd the children out by providing them with free homes or boarding them in families? In many instances these youthful boarders are kept by the families permanently, their laughter and their tears and their little helpful ways having won for them a father's and mother's love and care. I called one day to take away two children who were boarding in a farm house, having found a good home in the neighborhood for them. "I am as able," said the good farmer, "to take care of Johnnie and Maggie as Mrs. B., and will keep these children without pay, for we love them; make out the papers and what is ours will be theirs." A woman came to my office and asked if I would come some evening to her house and talk to her husband about adopting a child, for she could not induce him to do so. Being satisfied from several sources that it would be a good home, I called and asked if I could board a little child there. "Yes," said the husband, "if it does not give my wife too much trouble." In two weeks I called to pay its board. "Keep your money, madam," said the man, "that child is ours if we can adopt it, etc." In a few weeks husband, wife and child went with me before Judge Hammond and 'nobody's' child became son and heir."

There is no philanthropic work which requires more thoroughness, tact, perseverance and enthusiasm than a placing-out agency.

Asylums should work cordially with county agents, and all interested should consider the future good of the child paramount to every other claim. A good home was offered to a little boy in an institution, by childless parents; they

selected him "because of his resemblance to their lost darling." The matron refused him because he was to take part in a concert exercise. The couple were going west the next day and could not wait; the boy lost a rare chance of adoption and remained in that asylum four years as a county boarder.

Sometimes a matron is very willing to give up a troublesome child, "glad to get rid of it," but this is a grave mistake. It is the best child that should be sent out first. A wayward child will discourage a whole neighborhood from taking children, while a satisfactory boy or girl will be the means of getting homes for other homeless children.

A child should never be shipped to a home; the agent should go with it. This journey will advertise the work and bring more applications, it will also show the community that these children have friends interested in them. If the agent has not been in that home before, she will have an opportunity of seeing its surroundings and of making suggestions to the foster parents about the care, training and protection of their ward. The party of the second part should always be made to realize that he is responsible for the future weal or woe of the child committed to his care, and the agent or whoever transferred it should never withhold co-operation from foster parents when requested. I have known in more than one instance a single visit from an experienced agent tide a girl or boy over the tiring and winning time and greatly strengthen the hands of foster parents in their efforts to creditably bring up their foster children.

When practicable agents should try to place sisters and brothers in one home or in one neighborhood. A little girl was selected from an orphanage and her younger sister was to be left behind to feel the separation with more bitterness than older persons imagine. "I wish," said the good-hearted woman, "that I could afford to take them both." "Take them," said the wide-awake agent, "and we will help you to clothe them." The sisters, hand in hand, went out with their new mother, no longer orphans. A lady who heard of this assumed the furnishing of their wardrobe, and for years sent a box of clothing and shoes to that faithful mother. A young man came into my office and asked if I would help him find his sister. He said that he was taken out of an asylum when six years old, and no one had ever enquired about him, that he had gone to school four terms and could scarcely read or write, that he was now twenty-one years old, had left his place and the man had given him a cow. "Sell your cow," said I, "and go west, and I will try to find your sister." I advertised and took every means to find her, but without success. Six months after I had a letter from the young man from Kansas. He was working a farm on shares, and wrote me he was doing well, and asked if I had found his sister. A few weeks after that, I was driving in the country searching for homes. "Do you know of any good farmers who would take homeless boys?" I asked a ploughman, "The deacon up there," said he, pointing to a house on the hill, "may take a boy, he is a good man." I drove to that farm house and told my mission. The deacon's wife said: "I don't think we will take a boy now; we brought up a girl and she married and did well. I am always sorry I did not keep her little brother; we took them both on trial but returned the boy. I thought the two would be too much for me, but the girl, to this day, wishes to know what became of that little brother." I asked the name of the boy, and was happy to tell these people where he was. The deacon was called into the house to hear the good news, and at once drove off to his daughter to tell her of her long lost brother. A correspondence was commenced and the young man came to see his never-forgotten sister. I learned afterward that the sister and her family joined him in Kansas. Had the deacon's wife been urged to retain the boy and a modest sum been offered for boarding him temporarily, "little Timothy" might have secured the "cozy

home" with his sister. Brothers and sisters should know of each other and exchange likenesses when they reach maturity, and this can be done through visiting agencies—and here I would say that unless provision is made for a helpful, discreet, constant following out of indentured or taken children, the placing-out system had better not be undertaken.

A very sad case of careless supervision came lately under my notice. A lady wrote me, asking if I could find out something of her family. She was adopted from an orphan asylum, was now married and in good circumstances, a cultivated and refined woman. I visited her sister who was taken out of the same asylum when a very bright girl of ten years, and learned that she had only been once visited by the asylum officials. She had been a perfect slave, and gone only three terms to school, had not had in years a new outside garment, had no companions, no amusements, no parties of young people at her home, no money, no ambition. She had worked as gardener, cook and laundress; had nursed her aged foster father for months, sleeping on a lounge in his bed room, and when he died, found that he had made no provision for her in his will, but left her to the mercy of a foster mother who will probably do her the same injustice at her death as she has done in her life. Had this poor girl been visited semi-annually, these injustices would not have been tolerated. These sisters met after twenty years of separation. I draw a veil over that meeting.

Institutions and societies should look closely after children they have placed in homes, until the certainty of their kind treatment is assured. There are, of course, many just and generous masters who need only a passing word of commendation, and children adopted legally should require no further interference; but in the general work of placing out children, supervision is an important part of the work.

I do not agree with some agents, that surprise visits are always the best. Besides the surprise visits there should be an annual arranged visit; the master and boy prepare for this, the boy in earning a good record for the agent, the master in showing the boy to be well clothed, not over-worked, and regular in his attendance at school. Again, an unfavorable impression may be made by an untimely visit. A noble woman adopted a woe-begone little waif, her orphanage being her only attraction. She grew up a graceful, intelligent young lady. The agent's first visit was a great mortification to that mother. She was house-cleaning, and the child was her first day out of school in four months. Another visit was arranged. The agent was met by the father and driven to the house, where she found several neighbors who intended taking children. The house was decorated with evergreens, the little girl was in holiday attire, and all sat down to a sumptuous repast. Such visits are gratifying, especially when a poor mother accompanies the agent. Country people are hospitable, and seldom refuse to allow a virtuous parent to visit an indentured child, and, even in cases of legal adoption, parents are known to have been allowed that privilege. "I love my adopted child so much," said a good woman, "that my heart aches for the poor father, and he can come to see her sometimes."

There is often little sympathy shown in the breaking up of a virtuous home, although it is tearing the heart strings of mother and children. "We will take your children to an orphan asylum, and you can go out and work," says the public official to the bereaved widow. "We will pay your rent, find you work and help you bring up your little ones at home," should be the echo of the church or the benevolent individual.

An agent should not be discouraged because a boy has run away from his home. Get hold of him and take him back, or get him another place. Provide him with an overcoat or a pair of boots (a few weeks as a country boarder will

cost this much), tell him to write to you sometimes and that you will send him the Youth's Companion. Say to the farmer that it will be to his interest to treat the lad wisely and kindly, tell him to provide the boy with evening amusement, to send him to school, and when he leaves school to pay him small wages, increasing them as he deserves, and the chances are that both master and apprentice will be benefited. A worthy farmer said to me: "I will have to let Willie go because he is so dissatisfied, he has been with me five years and is now of great use to me, but I fear that he will run away and I would rather return him." "How much will you pay for a hand in his place?" I asked. "Fifteen dollars a month," he replied. "Then why not pay the lad that instead of hiring a stranger?" "Oh, but I took the boy when he was eleven years old, and I have cared for him and schooled him, and now he should work willingly without wages." "True, sir, but 'children never go to bed in debt,' besides he has always worked for you when out of school, it is for your interest and the boy's interest that you pay him wages." The boy remained, and in after years he could see from his own farm his former home.

Children should be told of their adoption in a careful and loving way as soon as they are old enough to comprehend it. It will not lessen their affection for their foster parents if told when young. They are sure to learn of it at some future time. It is a great wrong to bring up a foster child in the belief that it is an own child.

A beautiful little girl two and a half years old was adopted by persons of wealth and position. They sold their possessions and went west, so it would not be known in their new home that the child was not their own. The father suddenly died and the mother was prostrated with grief. The daughter, then a handsome young lady, set about arranging her father's affairs, and in his desk found the adoption papers. The scene that followed was heart-rending. The excitement almost proved fatal to the mother and left the daughter in a state of melancholy. But the daughter rallied and the mother recovered and lived to enjoy the continued love and devotion of her adopted child, who always maintained that she should have been told of her adoption. A sister and brother were adopted in one neighborhood, neither of them know of their adoption or relationship. They attended the same church and enjoyed the same social pleasures. The time came when it seemed necessary to tell them. The young man left his home and did not return until after the sister had married and gone away.

A child should not be sent to a reform school except as a last resort. I have little faith in large institutions doing children much good. If they were agricultural schools on the cottage plan we might expect good results, but sending a boy to an asylum, where there are over one hundred or more wayward boys, perhaps worse than himself, congregated in one building, how can he reform! The founder of Buggen Mission in Germany, after fifty years experience in child-saving work, warned his assistants not to depend on institutions, especially large ones, for the rescuing of neglected children. "They are apt," wrote the good man, "to become, without God's gracious care, hotbeds of corruption." Some time ago I met a young man whom years before I had helped to get out of the house of refuge. He was an engineer and had got along well in the world. He talked of his unjust commitment but said, "It did me good." "Did you good, how?" "Because I saw so much evil it disgusted me, and I resolved never to be what some of those boys were, and yet, if I had remained much longer I might have been bad enough."

There are doubtless many children in institutions who have no claim on them, either as delinquent or destitute. At the convention of charities in New York city last November, it was stated that children were sent to an asylum for

juvenile delinquents, for disobedience to parents. I wanted to suggest the need of an institution for delinquent parents, to teach them how to "Chasten thy son while there is hope." This shirking of parental authority and parental obligation is becoming alarming, and it does not need a prophet's eye to see how it will end. Neglectful parents who can and will not provide for their children should lose all claim to them and to their services. I agree with Mrs. Lowell, that "a parent who will not perform the duties of a parent should not have the rights of a parent." If fathers were made to pay for their children in institutions either charitable or correctional, the army of juvenile dependents would be smaller.

Children should be removed from immoral homes without delay; the moral safety of a child is of more consideration than the legal or virtual rights of depraved parents. But whether the homelessness of unfortunate waifs is caused by orphanage, neglect or "evil circumstances," they must be provided for, and this can best be done by painstaking agencies restoring them to family life and placing them under Christian home influences. Every county in the state should have one or more agents appointed to look after the rights of both taxpayers and dependent children. This is a work of economy as well as of philanthropy. There are in our insane asylums, poor mothers whose nerves have given way under the pressure of domestic and maternal duties that should have been lightened by the female help that could not be obtained. There are in our houses of refuge, young women who might have been valued domestics in country homes had a child-saving agency rescued them before they became depraved. There are hundreds of childless homes in our states that might be made brighter and better by the pattering of little feet; there are hundreds of little children in our orphan asylums longing for the love and sympathy to which they are strangers. The life of a child in the average institution is artificial and loveless. The mechanical kiss of the truest matron or sister of charity can never satisfy the hunger for mother-love of the mitherless bairn.

Euphame Napier, the heroine of the story of "Lady Somerville's Maidens," was brought up in an orphanage, and kent weel its unnatural life, and that made her heart go out in a great sympathy to the twa orphan weans as she lifted them from the grasp of their dead mither, who lay cauld and stiff on one of the back streets in Edinburgh, and when she said, "I'll take them hame, and fend for them," the doubtful burgess said, "A likely clog to a young woman's tails. You're but a daft enthusiast of a lass; learn discretion before ye proffer liberality that's fit for a magistrate." But the brave maiden took them hame and spun for them, and when clever "Mark Chricton" married her, he thocht the callants nae clog, but helped her bring them up, and the lads arose and called her blessed.

